



Alaska Division of Public Health

Prevention Promotion Protection

Foodborne Botulism Fact Sheet

What is foodborne botulism?

Botulism is caused by bacteria that makes a toxin (a poison) that can get into the food. If a person eats the food with the toxin they can become very sick because the toxin paralyzes the body's muscles. In fact, a person can die from botulism because the toxin can cause a person to stop breathing.

How do I get foodborne botulism?

In Alaska, all reported foodborne botulism cases have been in Alaska Native people who had recently eaten traditionally prepared, aged Native foods such as stink heads, stink eggs, whale, beaver or seal oil.

What are the symptoms of botulism?

The classic symptoms of botulism can include vomiting, diarrhea, double vision, blurred vision, drooping eyelids, slurred speech, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth, and trouble walking. Sometimes people might look like they are drunk. If untreated, a person who is sick with botulism can stop breathing and die.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms of botulism usually appear 12–36 hours after eating food that contains toxin, but can occur as early as 6 hours or as late as 10 days.

What is the treatment for botulism?

Treatment for botulism requires medical and nursing care. **If you or someone you know has symptoms of botulism, go to the clinic right away** or call your clinic for help. Botulism can be prevented from getting worse with an antitoxin that blocks the action of toxin circulating in the blood. People often still need to stay in the hospital to manage their other symptoms. Sometimes, if they are having trouble breathing, they may require a breathing machine (ventilator) for weeks. People who are not treated or monitored for botulism may die.

How can botulism be prevented?

Only cooking or boiling food destroys botulinum toxin. Freezing does not destroy the toxin. If you prepare or eat traditionally prepared Alaska Native foods, the food safety tips below may decrease your risk of botulism.

Food Safety Tips

1. Wash your hands, your containers and your food before preparing your food.
2. Use methods that discourage the growth of *C. botulinum* bacteria when preparing traditional aged Native foods.
 - a. Use salt to preserve dried fish and discourage the growth of *C. botulinum* bacteria.
 - b. Do not use plastic, glass or sealed plastic bags to age foods as these create a low-oxygen environment that encourages the growth of the bacteria.
 - c. Age and store foods at a cold temperature, ideally below 37 degrees Fahrenheit.
3. Consider boiling or cooking food because heat destroys botulinum toxin. Depending on the food, this may be an option to reduce the presence of toxin in aged traditional foods.
4. When in doubt, throw it out.

Please remember.....if you or someone you know has symptoms of botulism, go to the clinic right away or call your clinic for help.